

ONCE WERE GARDENERS

Māra and planting protest at Ihumātao

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Abstract

In a 2009 speech, prominent Māori lawyer Moana Jackson said that the novel *Once Were Warriors* (Duff, 1990) could have been more appropriately named *Once Were Gardeners* (New Zealand Drug Foundation, 2009). By doing so he argued against the notion that Māori possess a “warrior gene” predisposing them to violence. Instead, Jackson maintained, Māori were more likely to have a predisposition for gardening. Gardening, or mahi māra, has been practised by Māori for centuries in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although motivations may have changed, mahi māra remains an important expression of what it means to be Māori. This affirmation is particularly relevant when it comes to the recent Māori occupation of Ihumātao, one of the oldest Māori settlements in Aotearoa. This article explores the idea that gardens and gardening demonstrate a form of Māori protest and resistance. It also examines the importance of māra at Ihumātao and its occupation to Kelly Marie Francis, known as “The Whenua Warrior”, a member of the group occupying Ihumātao, Save Our Unique Landscape (SOUL). Understanding the occupation acknowledges the importance of māra in te ao Māori.

Keywords

māra, mahi māra, Māori gardening, protest, resistance, Ihumātao

Introduction

Māra were an integral part of Māori society prior to colonisation (Best, 1976; Colenso, 1880; Furey,

2006; Hargreaves, 1963; Smith, 2011). Māori survival was largely dependent on the ability to cultivate, harvest and store kai produced from māra.

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The plant foods that were cultivated included kūmara, taro, yam and gourd, with kūmara being the principal crop. The colder climate of Aotearoa New Zealand compared to the ancestral Māori homeland islands in the Pacific required Māori to be innovative in their approach to gardening, implementing strategies such as the use of subterranean storage pits and spreading charcoal or gravel around gardens for heat retention (Best, 1976; Colenso, 1880; Furey, 2006).

Beyond subsistence, mahi māra has played a pivotal role in social and spiritual life for Māori. Gardening was not just about sustenance, it was also about the retention, affirmation and acquisition of mana (Petrie, 2006). Mana is described as the absolute power and authority bestowed upon humans by the atua (Marsden, 2003). Rangatira held mana and responsibility that required them to be able to feed their people and provide food for hui and hākari. The size of a garden reflected the mana of rangatira as leaders—the bigger the garden, the more people could be fed.

When iwi, hapū and whānau have authority over specific pieces of land, they hold what is known as mana whenua. Having mana whenua allows different Māori groups to cultivate and protect the realm of Papatūānuku through the practice of mahi māra. Cultivation of the land was therefore seen as a way of exercising a right as mana whenua. Mahi māra is a vital practice for Māori, not just as a means for producing food and therefore sustenance, but also in its connection to the spiritual realm of Māori organisation.

Māori were quick to adopt the technologies that European settlers brought with them in the 19th century, benefiting settlers through a process of trade (Hargreaves, 1963). The new technologies included the spade and the hoe, and their inclusion in gardening practices increased productivity for many Māori. The trade in potato benefited Māori economies and there are records of Māori trading in the United States and Australia (Petrie, 2002). European tools increased the rate at which Māori could cultivate their lands, further increasing production (Firth, 1972; Hargreaves, 1963).

However, to cultivate land, you must have land to cultivate. The arrival of settlers and the forceful alienation of Māori from their land that followed halted much of the pre-colonial gardening practices of Māori. As a result of various methods of land acquisition by Pākehā—including undermining of Māori customary ownership and iwi authority, sometimes even without any form of compensation—Māori were subjugated and disenfranchised in their homeland. What the land

loss meant for Māori gardening was an inability to exercise their mana whenua as they had previously done.

Ihumātao

Land alienation and its relationship to mahi māra has recently been brought into sharp focus by the Māori occupation of Ihumātao in the suburb of Māngere in Tāmaki Makaurau. Believed to be one of the oldest Māori settlements in Aotearoa, Ihumātao has also been used for Māori food cultivation since the late 1400s (Waitangi Tribunal, 1989). The site was cultivated for years and much of its produce was used to feed the people in Auckland (O'Malley, 2016, 2019; Waitangi Tribunal, 1989). A feature of Ihumātao is Ōtuataua Stonefields, a historic reserve which was a site of Māori gardening pre-confiscation. The land at Ihumātao (also known as Te Ihu o Matāoho) was cultivated extensively by Māori because its fertile volcanic soil was perfect for food production.

On 23 July 2019, the situation at Ihumātao reached nationwide consciousness as tensions caused by a land dispute came to a head. Māori occupying the land were served with an eviction notice (“Protestors at Ihumātao”, 2019) and around 100 police officers were deployed to the site (Furley, 2019). The history leading up to this point is long and incredibly complex. In 1863, land at Ihumātao was unjustly confiscated by the Crown as part of the invasion of the Waikato, and then granted to the Wallace family, who used the land for farming. The confiscation was later found to be in breach of the partnership agreement forged by Te Tiriti o Waitangi | the Treaty of Waitangi (O'Malley, 2016, 2019; Waitangi Tribunal, 1989). In July 2014, 32 hectares of land adjacent to Ōtuataua Stonefields were designated by the government as a Special Housing Area, meaning that the land could be used for housing development. Fletcher Building Limited purchased the land from the Wallace family in 2016, striking a deal with a local iwi, Te Kawerau ā Maki, to develop 480 houses on the site. In the same year and in response to these plans, an activist group called Save Our Unique Landscape (SOUL), comprised of members of the Ihumātao community (including some mana whenua), began occupying the land. While the resistance to the planned development by SOUL has been ongoing since 2016, the occupation gained major nationwide attention in 2019 when police moved in to evict the group. Since then, thousands from all around the country have visited the site to show support and to aid in the occupation of the land, with many comparing

Ihumātao to the occupation of Bastion Point in 1977–1978 (Furley, 2019; Russel, 2019).

The current protest has seen a revitalisation of cultivation practices that are historically embedded within this site. As mentioned earlier, historically cultivation of māra was motivated by subsistence needs, mana and trade. More recently, research around mahi māra detail the well-being benefits of the practice for Māori, with the creation of community gardens being used to promote healthy eating habits and resilience against climate change and environmentally damaging food production practices (Earle, 2011; Hond et al., 2019; McKerchar et al., 2014; Wham et al., 2012). As part of the occupation, occupiers began cultivating gardens on the whenua at Ihumātao. These cultivations were expressions of both protest and resistance, and can be seen in the historical context of Māori gardening in Aotearoa. Gardening as a form of resistance has been exemplified historically in the 19th-century resistance movements of Parihaka in Taranaki and Te Ao Mārama in the South Island, at what is now Lake Benmore (Mikaere, 1988; Scott, 1975). And now, in 2020, mahi māra is part of the ongoing protests to preserve the historic food pits at Pukeiāhua Pā in Ngāruawāhia (Muru-Lanning, 2020).

In Parihaka, one of the first protest actions taken by the prophet Te Whiti as part of his peaceful resistance was to order men to plough up the land of Pākehā farmers. Similarly, mahi māra was used in the passive resistance of the prophet Hipa Te Maihāroa, as his people cultivated land at their settlement of Te Ao Mārama. This ongoing use of mahi māra as a form of protest has been sustained at Ihumātao. Mahi māra practices at Ihumātao were explored through a visit to the whenua and a conversation with Kelly Marie Francis (Ngāti Wharara, Ngāti Korokoro, Ngāpuhi), one of the SOUL activists occupying Ihumātao.

Kelly Marie Francis—The Whenua Warrior

To explore how mahi māra has manifested at Ihumātao, an interview was conducted at the site in October 2019 with Kelly Marie Francis, known as “The Whenua Warrior”, one of the SOUL activists responsible for setting up māra at the protest site. For almost two years, Francis has been heading the Whenua Warrior Charitable Trust, an organisation she started with the mission of “building hapū one community garden at a time”. During this time, she has also been occupying Ihumātao alongside Pania Newton, the leader of SOUL, and other members of the group. Her background in māra kai led to her

being placed in charge of planting and growing māra on the whenua.

From the very beginning of the occupation, mahi māra has played an integral part in everyday life at Ihumātao, as well as playing a symbolic role in the overall protest. Francis emphasised that the concepts of tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake are critical in the kaupapa of their occupation on the whenua, and that mahi māra is not separate from these ideas:

Our first front line, on May the 6th (2019)—were garden boxes! And they were built by people from the community the day before. They had kids’ handprints on them. . . . [M]āra is a part of having full sovereignty here.

Francis also spoke about the importance of māra practices on the whenua being centralised within people’s awareness of the occupation at Ihumātao:

When you’re talking about reclaiming tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake and the use of whenua and how that is going to be effective forever and ever, you look at something like Ihumātao, you can’t just drive past it anymore. It’s really imperative that the understanding of what is happening here is clear, and not only that but the last thing that happened with this land was gardens and our people used to be able to survive on that!

This comment also acknowledges the importance of creating awareness of māra practice, not only for the benefit of the occupation at Ihumātao, but also in the pursuit of wider Māori sovereignty. Francis explained that more people need to know that they have the ability to be self-sustaining, and that this is what Māori had practised on this land prior to colonisation. These gardening practices had been so successful that the gardens that once existed at Ihumātao were able to feed the population, including Pākehā settlers.

Francis also described that it is crucial that the practice be well thought out and attentive to the mātauranga associated with gardening. When speaking about one of the first gardens SOUL set up on the whenua, she detailed its origin and also the process of its activation at night-time:

We did the shape of that garden in the shape of a stingray, which signifies Hape—the rangatira of this land and his trip over from Hawaiiki. When he got here, he had travelled on the back of Kaiwhare, which is a giant stingray, hence the shape of the garden. Because I have worked this whenua now, I

know that the people of Te Ihu o Matāoho would have had to have worked at night-time because it gets far too hot here. I wanted to signify that in the mahi as well, so we did the project at 8 p.m.

This level of attention to the details of mahi māra demonstrates a deep respect for the importance of the practice and its place within the historical narrative of the area.

Discussing the future of Ihumātao, Francis spoke about how mahi māra is not just important for the current occupation of Ihumātao, but also something that she and SOUL leader Newton see as an inevitable future for the whenua there: “Pania asked me once, did you know that this land here used to feed the whole of Auckland? And I said, ‘Huh . . . I reckon we could do that again girl!’”

Francis discussed how the aims for Ihumātao in relation to the māra will not stop after her lifetime, nor that of her mokopuna. To realise the pursuit of tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake, Francis believes that Ihumātao must be used to cultivate food on a large scale.

Ihumātao will be a food forest, full stop. Ihumātao will be an example of complete and utter food sovereignty based on the food being grown here and being governed here. I want every piece of food that is grown on this land to be free.

Discussion

Several key themes stood out for the visit to Ihumātao and the conversation with Francis, the first of which was the clear link that māra at Ihumātao have with the concepts of mana whenua, tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake. Throughout the political history of Māori, these three concepts have been integral to Māori protest and resistance movements (Harris, 2004; Taonui, 2012).

As mentioned, cultivation of land for Māori can be seen as a way of exercising rights as mana whenua. The ownership and authority of the land at Ihumātao is currently in dispute. SOUL wants the land returned to mana whenua and are making their demands visible by the necessary and symbolic act of cultivating the land. Examples of this were evident through māra practice, not just as described by Francis, but also as physical manifestations on the whenua at the occupation. One of the first things that people who visit Ihumātao are greeted with are brightly painted, handmade garden boxes which sit on the road, blocking vehicle access. Francis spoke about the political

symbolism of these gardens in terms of the links to an ongoing history at the site. Historically gardens were created to sustain Ihumātao Māori; gardening practices are now being used to restrict vehicle access to Ihumātao through careful positioning of planter boxes. These planter boxes act as both a physical and a symbolic frontline blockade.

Rather than māra being used for subsistence only, māra act as vital claims to mana whenua authority. Related to the concept of mana whenua is tino rangatiratanga, a term used in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Orange, 2004) and translated as “absolute sovereignty”. Since the signing of Te Tiriti in 1840, the term has been used extensively in political discourse concerning Māori protest and resistance (Harris, 2004; Taonui, 2012). The māra at Ihumātao demonstrate tino rangatiratanga because, according to the occupiers, to cultivate the land is to control what is happening over it.

Francis also spoke about how their māra are used to engage in mana motuhake, which is translated as “separate power and authority”. The term is used most often in reference to Māori and the separate authority they possess as the Indigenous peoples of this land. Mana motuhake is used to describe the notion of self-determination and, like mana whenua, is used often in Māori political discourse (Harris, 2004; Taonui, 2012). Francis discussed how cultivation of kai at the occupation enabled members of SOUL and visitors to engage in a food system separate from the dominant food production and distribution systems that have become the norm. A refusal to engage with wider systems of mass food production is a move towards self-determination and is a protest in itself, one that Francis hopes will become stronger as more gardens are created there.

Using the land for māra kai at Ihumātao means using it in the same manner as had been done prior to colonisation. Ōtuataua Stonefields is a now physical reminder that before Europeans arrived, the land was used to feed the population of those who lived there (Furey, 2006; Waitangi Tribunal, 1989). The historic use of the land is imprinted on the landscape. And while the land certainly holds historic links that make gardening on it significant, the land also has its own, very practical benefits. Francis asserts that “[t]his is volcanic soil; the quality is ridiculous. You put anything in it and it’s going to grow.” To her, the land should continue to be used as the tūpuna intended. Again, in this way the practice of māra kai acts as a claim to ownership of the whenua in ways that connect us with the past, and in doing so demonstrate tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake.

This historic significance relates well to the findings of Hond et al. (2019) with regard to māra, well-being and identity. Internationally, community gardening has gained much attention due to its benefits in many different areas. The positive health outcomes of community gardens are well researched (Earle, 2011; Soga et al., 2017), but literature detailing this practice for Māori is still emerging. Hond et al. (2019) recently conducted an investigation into the role of Māori community gardens in health promotion. The study found that community gardens provide various benefits, one being that they offer a rich opportunity for Māori to re-connect with ancestral lands. Sir Mason Durie (1999) asserts that mental health problems can be partly treated by increasing security with cultural identity. As is the case with Ihumātao, Māori loss of cultural identity (e.g., practising māra) is linked deeply with the confiscation of whenua. Today, the gardens at Ihumātao provide an opportunity for Māori to reclaim a practice ingrained in their identity.

The final theme that was made very evident in the conversation with Francis was the idea that community gardening is deeply rooted in the future of Ihumātao. Whether Ihumātao will be returned to mana whenua or not is currently being deliberated by the relevant parties (McLachlan, 2019). This is not the focus of this article; the focus instead is on gardening as a symbol of resistance. It is almost certain that Francis and the SOUL community will be occupying and cultivating, as Francis puts it, “ake ake ake amine” (“forever and ever”). Community gardens are not just a part of the current occupation according to Francis, but are something inextricably connected with the future use of the whenua of Ihumātao, culturally, socially and economically.

Those who are occupying the land at Ihumātao are looking to cultivate this land indefinitely. This can be seen as a long-term reclamation of Māori land, authority and identity in response to the traumatic and ongoing history of colonisation.

Conclusion

This article investigated the importance of mahi māra as a symbol of protest within the context of Māori resistance. The research behind it explored both historic and recent events at Ihumātao and included a conversation with Kelly Marie Francis, a member of the occupying group responsible for the māra on the whenua. Francis’s experience of the occupation shows a connection between the practice of māra and protest concepts such as mana whenua, tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake.

Furthermore, it is clear the significance that mahi māra holds in the kaupapa of the Ihumātao occupation is bolstered by its historical relationship to the area, a significance also reinforced by the commitment to continue these gardening practices into the future.

These concepts give rise to a specific way of thinking about Māori protest in terms of land cultivation or mahi māra. Investigating this is important because it enriches our understanding of where mahi māra fits into society from a Māori perspective. Throughout Māori history māra have been motivated by mana, trade and, more recently, the promotion of health and well-being. This article articulates another function of Māori gardening practice evident at Parihaka, Te Ao Mārama, and now at the current occupation of Ihumātao: Māori protest and resistance.

Māra practices may have been considered to be simply a remnant of a distant past. However, exploration of māra, its history, meaning and, in this case, its relation to politics reveals that the practice is deserving of much deeper consideration in the context of the struggle for tino rangatiratanga, mana motuhake and the acknowledgement of mana whenua.

Glossary

Aotearoa	Māori name for New Zealand
atua	deities
hākari	feast, banquet
hapū	sub-tribe
Hawaiki	places from which Māori migrated to Aotearoa
hui	meetings
Ihumātao	area in the Auckland suburb of Māngere
iwi	tribe
kai	food
kaupapa	topic, matter, theme
kūmara	sweet potato
mahi	work
mahi māra	gardening, the practice of gardening
mana	power, authority
mana motuhake	separate authority, separate mana
mana whenua	power and authority over land; those with power and authority over land
Māngere	suburb of Auckland in the North Island of New Zealand

Māori	Indigenous peoples of New Zealand
māra	garden(s)
mātauranga	knowledge
mokopuna	grandchildren
Ngāpuhi	tribe of northern New Zealand
Ngāti Korokoro	sub-tribe of Ngāpuhi
Ngāti Wharara	sub-tribe of Ngāpuhi
Ōtuataua Stonefields	pre-colonial gardening site in present-day Māngere
Pākehā	New Zealanders of European descent
Papatūānuku	Earth mother, deity of the land
Parihaka	settlement established in the mid-1860s on the slopes of Mount Taranaki
rangatira	leader(s), chief(s)
Tāmaki Makaurau	Māori name for Auckland, New Zealand's largest city
te ao Māori	the Māori world
Te Ao Mārama	settlement near Omarama established by the prophet Te Maihāroa in 1877
Te Ihu o Matāoho	lit., "the nose of Matāoho"; full name of Ihumātao
Te Kawerau a Maki	tribe of Auckland
tino rangatiratanga	sovereignty, absolute authority
tūpuna	ancestors
whānau	family
whenua	land(s)

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